Transnational Political Threats and International Conflict

Literature on the link between authoritarian politics and use of military force focuses on how autocratic institutions weakly constrain foreign policy (Weeks 2012), empower aggressive individuals (Colgan and Weeks 2015), and generate norms conducive to international belligerence (Owen 2002). One understudied variable that may drive autocratic regimes to use force abroad is fear that their domestic authority will be subverted by political outcomes inside other states. When diffusion logic causes regimes to perceive their authority as vulnerable to other states’ politics, they may undertake military interventions to affect which political factions “win out” within the power struggles of these states in order to safeguard their domestic rule.

In this paper, I theorize the factors that cause regimes to favor military intervention as a tool to mitigate the risk of transnational political subversion. My project examines how leaders’ concerns over political subversion may cause them to seek influence over other states’ affairs. Only a few studies directly address the link between leaders’ fears of political subversion and foreign military intervention (Werner 1996; Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Owen 2002; Nelson 2014). I generate original hypotheses that investigate the domestic political conditions that cause leaders to believe that forcibly shaping the internal political crises of other states (usually neighbors) is necessary to safeguard their domestic authority.
I examine a range of contemporary cases from the Middle East including the Saudi intervention in Yemen and the Emirati and Egyptian interventions in Libya. My research offers insight into the international aggression of leaders like Muammar Qaddafi, Fidel Castro, and Saddam Hussein. Each of these leaders launched wars abroad (Chad, Angola, and Iran—respectively) because they sought to shape the internal politics of other states for their own domestic-political reasons.

Finally, my project sheds light on why diplomatic efforts to resolve civil war succeed or fail. States that intervene in civil conflicts because their leaders are concerned about political contagion are ill-suited to broker peace settlements for these conflicts, though they often attempt to play such a role. Non-interventionist states whose leaders do not see a link between their domestic political authority and the political change unfolding in the conflict state are better suited to broker peace settlements because actors within the civil war are more inclined to perceive these states as neutral mediators. This logic explains why Oman (rather than Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, or Kuwait) is the Gulf state best positioned to mediate Yemen’s civil war (Cafiero and Wagner 2015).